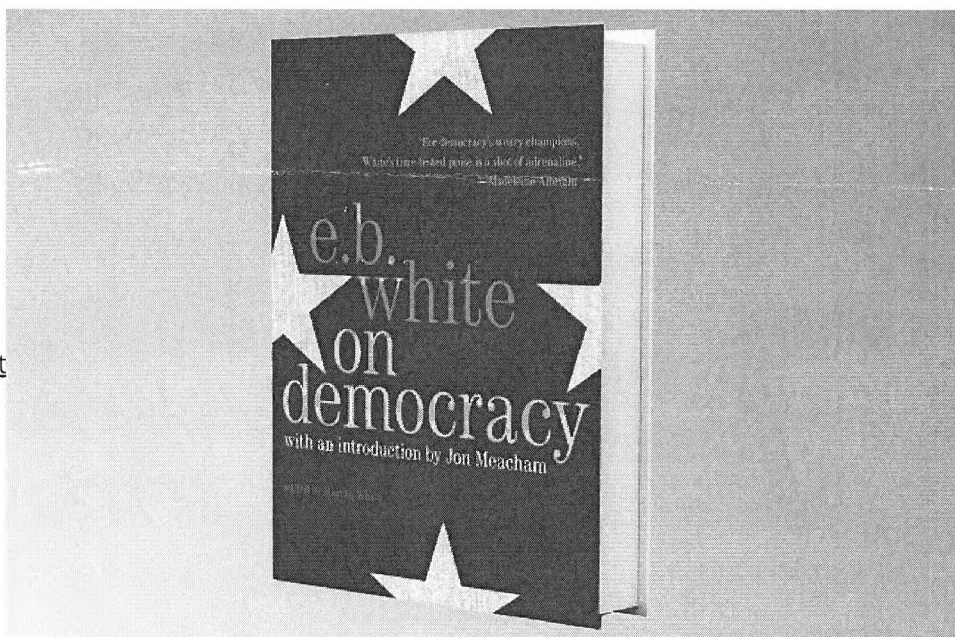


Commentary (/newyorklawjournal/commentary/)

# E.B. White's Words Resonate in These Dangerous Times

E.B. White writes repeatedly about the public's need for access to a full range of opinion, and he would doubtless be dismayed by the demonization of a press that disputes quasi-official journalistic mouthpieces.

By **Ronald W. Meister** | August 19, 2019 at 11:57 AM



e.b. white on democracy

Martha White, editor

HarperCollins – 193 pages

“Democracy is destructible. It is, indeed. It can be destroyed by a single zealous man who holds aloft a freedom sign while quietly undermining all of freedom’s cherished institutions.”

Those words, which resonate in this Republic in these dangerous times, are not a recent commentary, but were written in an October 1964 letter to the Bangor (Maine) Daily News, in opposition to a Republican presidential candidate who was denouncing adversaries as “the enemy of the people, depicting social welfare as the

## Trending Stories

- In Law Firms, 'Caste System Persists Among Attorneys and Business Professionals**  
[\(https://www.law.com/american-law-firms-caste-system-persists-among-attorneys-a-business-professionals/\)](https://www.law.com/american-law-firms-caste-system-persists-among-attorneys-a-business-professionals/)  
THE AMERICAN LAWYER (/AMERICANLAWYER/)
- Sanction: Texas Judge Interfered in Cases to Help Ex-Court Coordinator, Who' Now District Clerk**  
[\(https://www.law.com/texas-judge-interfered-in-cases-to-help-his-ex-court-coordinator-whos-now-district-clerk/\)](https://www.law.com/texas-judge-interfered-in-cases-to-help-his-ex-court-coordinator-whos-now-district-clerk/)  
TEXAS LAWYER (/TEXASLAWYER/)
- Corporate Counsel Announces Its 2019 Women, Influence Power in Law Awards**  
[\(https://www.law.com/corporate-counsel-announces-its-2019-women-influence-power-in-law-awards/\)](https://www.law.com/corporate-counsel-announces-its-2019-women-influence-power-in-law-awards/)  
CORPORATE COUNSEL (/CORPCOUNSEL/)
- Jury Awards \$4.2M After USAA Rejects \$100K Settlement Offer**  
[\(https://www.law.com/daily-awards-4-2m-after-usaa-rejects-100k-settlement-offer/\)](https://www.law.com/daily-awards-4-2m-after-usaa-rejects-100k-settlement-offer/)

contaminant in our lives, promising to use presidential power to end violence, arguing that the end justifies the means,...[and] suggesting that those of opposite opinion are perhaps of questionable loyalty." The writer was not a senator from Vermont, a former vice president, or the mayor of a big city, but an essayist known best for his authorship of children's books with adult themes, and a handbook on writing style.

E. B. White, by then 65, had been writing for the New Yorker magazine for almost 40 years, and occasionally for Harper's and The Atlantic, in a prose of crisp, straightforward honesty that still delights to such a degree that *The Elements of Style* can be read as much for its acerbic humor as its fussy prescriptiveness. As William Shawn, the New Yorker's editor, said on White's death in 1985, "E.B. White was a great essayist, a supreme stylist. His literary style was as pure as any in our language. It was singular, colloquial, clear, unforced, thoroughly American and utterly beautiful."

Because of his prolific output, White's writings have been collected in many anthologies, including *One Man's Meat*, *The Points of My Compass* and *The Second Tree from the Corner*, which all show the range of his writing about farming, the environment, words, politics and urban life. Even White's anonymous newsbreaks, those tiny editorial comments and hilarious corrections that appeared as fillers at the bottom of New Yorker articles, were collected in two obscure volumes unimaginatively entitled *Ho Hum* (1931) and *Another Ho Hum* (1932). More recently, his granddaughter Martha White has edited several collections on single themes, including *E.B. White on Dogs* and now, *e.b. white on democracy*, with a splendid introduction by the American historian Jon Meacham, himself no slouch with a pen. (Why dogs are entitled to upper case but democracy not, is a question presumably best addressed to jacket designer Milan Bozic, or to Ms. White herself, who appears in upper case).

Most of the pieces in this new collection are from White's New Yorker writings, and many have been published in anthologies before. Because of its narrow focus on one theme, there is a degree of sameness, as might be expected, and this book does not show off the broad range of White's interests and writings—there is only one piece about his morose dachshund, Fred, and nothing about the pigs, the plants and the planet that feature in much of his writing. Nor is there in these political writings the sense of personal involvement and introspection that characterizes his writing about the farm, the City, and his beloved Model T.

Many of these selections are devoted to an outdated concept of supranationalism (or One-Worldism, as its detractors might call it) that White supported in the 1930's and '40's. Far more successful from a contemporary viewpoint are his writings about liberty, fascism, McCarthyism and freedom of the press. Liberty, he reminds us, is often the opposite of freedom of choice, which before the Civil War included the commercial "freedom" to bring slaves to America, and in the 1920's led the unregulated securities industry into the crash. Fascism, he writes in 1946, with a chilling resonance seventy years later, is founded on racial supremacy, detention of unbelievers, obedience to one leader and contempt for legislative forms. McCarthyism, which he denounced in a series of letters to the *Herald Tribune*, which had supported the blacklisting of the Hollywood Ten, proposes to examine people's consciences, not their competence.

[DAILY REPORT ONLINE  
\(/DAILYREPORTONLINE/\)](https://www.law.com/newyorklawjournal/2019/08/19/e-b-whites-words-resonate-in-these-dangerous-times/)

5 **[Lawyer Resilience in a Pressure-Cooker Profession It's \(Probably\) Not What You Think.](https://www.law.com/newyorklawjournal/2019/08/19/e-b-whites-words-resonate-in-these-dangerous-times/)**  
[\(https://www.law.com/newyorklawjournal/2019/08/19/e-b-whites-words-resonate-in-these-dangerous-times/\)](https://www.law.com/newyorklawjournal/2019/08/19/e-b-whites-words-resonate-in-these-dangerous-times/)  
[LAW.COM \(HTTPS://WWW.LAW.COM\)](https://www.law.com/newyorklawjournal/2019/08/19/e-b-whites-words-resonate-in-these-dangerous-times/)

Though not a lawyer, White echoes the democratic strength and literary eloquence of Holmes in *Gitlow v. New York* that “every idea is an incitement” to be weighed in the marketplace of ideas, and of Brandeis in *Whitney v. California* that “freedom to think as you will and to speak as you think are means indispensable to the discovery and spread of political truth.” In White’s own words, “I hold that it would be improper for any committee or any employer to examine my conscience. They wouldn’t know how to get into it, they wouldn’t know what to do when they got in there, and I wouldn’t let them in anyway. Like other Americans, my acts and my words are open to inspection—not my thoughts or my political affiliation.”

As a journalist, White has a particular concern about the need for diversity of ownership and opinions in the press. He writes repeatedly about the public’s need for access to a full range of opinion, and he would doubtless be dismayed by the demonization of a press that disputes quasi-official journalistic mouthpieces.

Those seeking a broader range of White’s writing on non-political topics would be well advised to consult *Essays of E. B. White* (Harper & Row 1977), which includes the sparkling stories “Afternoon of an American Boy” (about his date with the sister of J. Parnell Thomas, who years later became chairman of the House Un-American Activities Committee), and “Farewell, My Lovely,” an ode to his Model T. But whichever of his works one reads, it helps to remember his message of hope in a letter of March 1973:

“Hope is the thing that is left to us, in a bad time. I shall get up Sunday morning and wind the clock, as a contribution to order and steadfastness....Hang on to your hat. Hang on to your hope. And wind the clock, for tomorrow is another day.”

*Ronald W. Meister is counsel to Cowan, Liebowitz & Latman.*

 SHARE  SHARE

## Dig Deeper

[Constitutional Law \(/topics/constitutional-law/\)](#)

[Government \(/topics/government/\)](#)